

Island Hopping in WW II

The Marianas

By John C. Reilly

In February 1944, with the Marshalls in hand and Truk's weakness exposed, Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher headed for the Mariana Islands with two of his task groups of Task Force (TF) 58. A Japanese scout plane spotted the force on the 22nd, and the carriers fought off a series of night attacks with gunfire. Early the next day, carrier planes hit Saipan, Tinian and Guam, destroying 150 newly arrived torpedo bombers on the ground and getting good photographs of airfields and landing beaches.

On 12 March 1944, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander, Pacific Ocean Area, to move on the Marianas by mid-June and the Palaus by mid-September, establishing bases to control the approaches to Formosa and the Philippines. The success of the recent raid on Truk convinced Nimitz that the island was not worth the lives, time and resources needed to capture it; instead, he would "neutralize" it and let it wither on the vine. Capture of the Marianas would isolate Truk and give the Navy an advanced base to attack Japanese sea communications and launch further amphibious offensives. The Army Air Forces had begun extreme-range attacks on the Japanese mainland with B-29 *Superfortresses* based in China; flying from the Marianas would cut 800 miles from the range with a corresponding increase in payload.

The Joint Chiefs' directive also called on the fast carriers to support General Douglas MacArthur's Army

troops in an amphibious jump to Hollandia, on New Guinea's north coast. This was out of reach of land-based air, and TF 58 demonstrated the strategic versatility of the carrier force by stepping in to fill the need. Admiral Raymond Spruance and his Central Pacific Force sailed from Majuro on 22 March 1944 with three carrier task groups. Spotted en route by Japanese search planes, Spruance decided to push ahead at best speed and attack on 30 March instead of the planned 1 April. Japanese planes attacked the force in the evening of the 29th without result, and hundreds of fighters and attack planes spent all day on 30 March and half of the 31st raking over the Palaus, sinking ships, destroying a large number of planes and planting mines in main harbor channels. One task group attacked Yap, in the Caroline Islands, and all three groups then struck Woleai. Woleai offered little in the way of targets, but Commander Samuel Dealey took the submarine *Harder* into water so shallow that she scraped bottom to rescue a downed carrier pilot under fire.

Some organizational changes entered the picture at this time. On 26 April 1944, Spruance's Central Pacific Force became the Fifth Fleet. In May, Admirals King and Nimitz set up a "two-platoon" command system, Adm. Spruance in command of the Fifth Fleet and Admiral William Halsey commanding the Third Fleet. The operating forces themselves remained the same, but the two commanders and fleet staffs were to alternate, one com-

mander taking the fleet to sea for a period of operations while the other commander planned the campaign that would follow. This was designed to allow ample time for planning while still letting one operation follow another with minimum delay.

On 13 April 1944, Adm. Mitscher sailed from Majuro with TF 58, five *Essex*-class fleet carriers (CVs) and seven *Independence*-class small carriers (CVLs). Hitting New Guinea targets on 21-24 April, the carriers turned north and revisited Truk before heading for Majuro; during their return, gunnery ships bombarded Satawan and Ponape.

Gen. MacArthur's landings at Aitape and Hollandia went well; he then quickly ordered another move westward, landing on the small offshore island of Wakde. Within days, another landing was aimed at the larger island of Biak.

The Japanese naval command had assumed that the main Allied thrust would come by way of New Guinea and that TF 58 was now committed to supporting Gen. MacArthur. They planned a naval counterstrike aimed at bringing the American carrier force to battle in the Caroline Islands area, between New Guinea and the Marianas. The pick of the available Japanese forces, including carriers, concentrated at Tawitawi and formed the Mobile Fleet under Vice Admiral

SB2Cs return to Yorktown (CV 10) after a strike in support of the Marianas landings. The Fast Carrier Force's mobile firepower was essential to the success of the central Pacific drive.



Jisaburo Ozawa, an experienced naval aviator.

The Japanese planners realized that TF 58 outgunned the new Mobile Fleet and supplemented their carrier planes with land-based aviation. This now made it essential to hold Biak with its airfield within range of the anticipated battle area. The Japanese moved considerable air strength to bases in New Guinea and the adjacent Moluccas and assembled a powerful surface force in the Moluccas to hit MacArthur at Biak.

Before the Biak strike could be mounted, Mitscher's carriers arrived off the Marianas and began to hit defenses and airfields. As soon as the Japanese high command heard this, they realized what was happening and ordered their naval striking forces north from Tawitawi and the Moluccas to rendezvous in the Philippine Sea.

As Allied forces crossed the English Channel to assault Fortress Europe, TF 58 led the way across a thousand miles of open ocean. During their approach, Army bombers struck airfields in the Caroline Islands, but aerial preparation for this invasion was entrusted solely to the carriers. On 11 June 1944, Mitscher launched his first carrier strikes against little opposition; much Japanese air power had been pulled south to face MacArthur. Battleships and cruisers from TF 58 bombarded Saipan and Tinian, and two task groups steamed north to strike Bonin Islands bases.

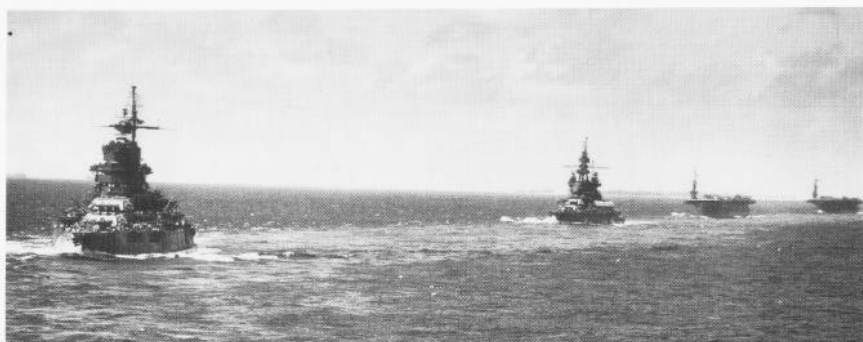
Saipan, the first objective, was nothing like Tarawa or Kwajalein. Fourteen miles long, mountainous and held by 32,000 Japanese troops, its defenses could not be broken by prelanding bombardment. It still had to be captured as rapidly as possible, since the Japanese were sure to strike back.

The landing force arrived off Saipan on 14 June, and its bombardment ships began their deliberate work. Early on the 15th, ships' gunfire was restricted to within a thousand yards of the beaches, while carrier planes went after active guns on Saipan and nearby Tinian and kept reinforcements from the landing area. Before H hour, the ships' guns checked fire as 165 planes from TF 58 came in to hammer assigned targets along the landing beaches; this last strike was intended more to shake and demoralize the defenders than to knock out specific de-

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Amphibious shipping assembles in a Marshalls lagoon under the umbrella of carrier aviation.



"Jeep carriers" and a variety of bombardment ships gave the landing force its own versatile spectrum of fire support. Specialized training and experience made CVEs and "gunships" indispensable to amphibious victory.



P-47 Thunderbolt fighters launch from an escort carrier for the flight to Saipan as the island is secured. Army fighters and artillery observation planes were ferried in by flattop to support the capture of Guam and Tinian.

fenses. As the planes left, the ships resumed shooting.

Marines went ashore with the help of heavy fire from ships and support craft, but took heavy casualties from Japanese defenses that had not been destroyed by guns or planes. Artillery and mortars in hills behind the beach were registered on the beaches and the outlying reef, and inflicted losses. Supporting aircraft, assigned in groups to specific areas and controlled by flight leaders and an airborne air coordinator, went after targets of opportunity. This was the first operation in which planes from the fast carriers gave close support to the landing forces. Demands for service came at a rapid pace, especially during the early days before Marine artillery could come ashore. A network of command posts and liaison officers did an effective job of filtering and coordinating requests for missions with the planes available. Support missions varied from heavy attacks before a general advance to precise strikes at individual targets by small numbers of planes using dive bombing, glide bombing, rocketing or strafing, as the mission demanded.

In the morning of 16 June, submarine contact reports were telling Adm. Spruance that the Japanese Mobile Fleet was approaching the Marianas. An Army division was landed to reinforce the Marines on Saipan; by the next day, the American attack began to move ahead against stiff resistance. Marines cut the island in two on 18 June, as Army troops took the principal airfield, and turned to push north on the 19th.

Meanwhile, the fleet was moving to counter the Japanese stroke. TF 58 had been waiting west of the Marianas in the hope of just such an action. It now formed in four task groups with seven CVs and eight CVLs. Mitscher knew that the Japanese carrier planes had longer strike ranges than his own. He wanted to steer westward and attack early on 19 June to keep Ozawa's planes from shuttling from their carriers to Guam and back—hitting the American carriers on both flights and getting two strikes in for the price of one. Spruance turned Mitscher down. The main objective as Spruance saw it was to protect the landing forces as they took the Marianas, and moving

too far to the west could leave the amphibious forces wide open for an end run by a Japanese flanking force. Then, too, contact reports were uncertain and no one could be sure just where the Mobile Fleet was. Under the circumstances, it appeared best to stay close to the Marianas.

Ozawa assumed that Spruance would stay within range of the Marianas as, in fact, he did. Planes from Guam and Rota were to open the attack, severely damaging TF 58 before carrier planes began shuttle runs between the Mobile Fleet and Guam. Japanese scout planes spotted TF 58 during the afternoon of 18 June, and Ozawa prepared to attack early on the 19th. His Van Force, three task groups formed around single CVLs, advanced 100 miles ahead of the Main Body, two three-carrier task groups. If the Americans attacked, the Van Force was to dull its force before it reached the Main Body.

In the morning of 19 June 1944, some 300 planes took off from Ozawa's carriers. The first part of the Japanese plan unraveled; many Guam-based planes had been destroyed on the ground or while en route from Japan. The small number of planes remaining on Guam tried to launch an

attack that morning, but carrier fighters tangled with them and with some reinforcements trying to fly in from Truk, and the attack was stillborn.

TF 58 had taken up air defense stations. The four-carrier task groups were in tight circular formation, surrounded by rings of cruisers and destroyers which were arranged for maximum all-around gunfire. The seven fast battleships of the force, with their own screening ships, were in their own formation between the carriers and the Japanese. Spaced 12 to 15 miles apart, the task groups were in position to support each other against air attack or to counter any attempt at an end run against Saipan. The advantage was with them; Ozawa had 430 planes where TF 58 had 891, and there was a wide difference in the relative experience of the Japanese and American aircrews.

The Japanese planes came in four separate raids. The first came from the Van Force; radar picked it up at 1000 and Mitscher immediately put over 450 fighters into the air. He then launched all his attack planes getting them clear of the area while the fighters landed to refuel and rearm before launching again. Fighter directors in the task force vectored the F6Fs to meet the in-



TBFs and SB2Cs of Hornet's (CV 12) air group arm for a strike as antiaircraft gun crews watch from their battle stations.

coming raid; they attacked from above and shot down nearly half of the incoming planes. Some got to the battleship task group, to be driven off by heavy antiaircraft fire. One bomb hit the battleship *South Dakota*, inflicting casualties but no serious damage. The second raid was similarly chopped down by fighters before reaching the battle line. One crashed into the side of *Indiana*, and two landed near-misses on the carrier *Bunker Hill* and set fires that were soon put out. Nearly all the planes of the third raid went astray and never found the task force. The last raid approached in groups, did minor damage and was shattered between the task force and Guam, losing all but 11 of 82 planes.

At the same time, two U.S. submarines approached the Main Body and mortally wounded the carriers *Shokaku* and *Taiho*. Some of Ozawa's pilots reported TF 58 badly damaged, and he turned westward to refuel and prepare for another attack the next day. When he found that he had lost more than three-fourths of his air strength, he decided to wait another day.

TF 58 recovered its planes from what its pilots were calling the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." Spruance was now ready to launch his own attack. One task group was left to keep the Japanese airfields out of action, and the others headed west through



Aerial view of Guam, on which Marines and Army troops landed 20 July 1944, taken by a Navy reconnaissance plane before the ground forces began the momentous assault. Etched in white, highways and military roads can be seen on a large Japanese installation near the shore of the base.

the night. Late in the afternoon on 20 June, the Japanese intercepted an American contact report. Realizing that an attack would follow, they turned up more speed in the hope of pulling away. Mitscher, however, had

decided that the risk of a night return at sea was worth taking to strike a decisive blow at the Japanese fleet, and he launched 216 planes before turning toward the Mobile Fleet to close the distance. The search pilot then radi-



Posing for photographer Edward Steichen, Navy Cross recipient Ltjg. Alexander Vraciu of VF-16 on board *Lexington* proudly displays the number of planes he shot down during the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot."



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oed that his initial contact report had been in error, and the Japanese fleet was 60 miles further from TF 58 than he had originally plotted it. Mitscher decided not to recall the strike that was already on the way but canceled a second strike that was to follow.

The squadrons flew more than 300 miles to sight their targets just before sunset. Dive and torpedo bombers sank the carrier *Hiyo* and two oilers, damaged carriers *Chiyoda* and *Zui-kaku*, a battleship and a cruiser. Anti-aircraft guns and *Zero* fighters downed 20 of TF 58's planes, but the stricken carriers took many of their own planes with them; by the end of the action, Ozawa had 35 of his original 430 planes left.

The return to the carriers became one of the legendary stories of the war. Their fuel tanks draining, the planes flew through the darkness. Some, in more dire condition than others, began to go down. The task groups had dispersed to give themselves ample sea room to recover aircraft. Shortly after 2000, the first planes were detected approaching the task force, and the carriers turned into the wind. Mitscher was now faced with a dilemma. If he turned on the lights of his darkened force, he would risk attack by Japanese submarines or

planes. If he left them off, many an aircrewman would die in the ocean. For reasons both military and humane, he ordered, "Turn on the lights." Ships turned on their running lights, searchlights were pointed into the sky and five-inch guns fired star shell into the air. Planes landed wherever and however they could; others went into the water as destroyers combed between the carriers to pick them up. Several planes ignored wave-offs and crash-landed, killing and injuring some men on the flight decks. *Enterprise* saw the most unusual landing of all as two planes landed simultaneously, snagging different arresting wires and coming out of it intact.

By 2230 that night, the recovery was over. TF 58 headed in the direction of the day's action, tracing the course followed by the strike and searching for survivors in the water. Through the next day, planes looked for Japanese stragglers but found none. On the evening of 21 June, TF 58 turned toward the Marianas.

The Turkey Shoot was now history, and TF 58 could devote time and attention to supporting the conquest of Saipan, and then of neighboring Tinian and Guam. The Pacific Fleet now had advanced bases from which to threaten western island groups and

slash at sea communications between the homeland and the oil fields of the East Indies, and the Army could now bomb the Japanese home islands at much closer range than heretofore.

Though we did not realize it, the Japanese high command was now convinced that the war could have only one outcome. ■

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50 Years Ago – WW II

6 Mar: A new specification for color of naval aircraft went into effect. The basic camouflage scheme used with fleet aircraft was modified slightly to provide for use of nonspecular sea blue on upper fuselage surface; airfoil surfaces visible from above remained semigloss sea blue, and other surfaces visible from below semigloss insignia white.

13 Mar: A new specification for color of fighter aircraft went into effect. It directed that fighters be painted glossy sea blue on all exposed surfaces.

15 Mar: The twin-engine North American PBJ *Mitchell* was taken into combat for the first time in its naval career in an attack on Rabaul by pilots of Marine Bombing Squadron 413.

15 Apr: Air-Sea Rescue Squadrons (VH) were formed in the Pacific Fleet to provide rescue and emergency services as necessary in the forward areas. Prior to this time, the rescue function was performed as an additional duty by regularly operating patrol squadrons.

19 Apr: *Saratoga*, operating with the British Eastern Fleet, participated in the carrier strike on enemy installations at Sabang in the Netherlands East Indies.

Left center: The Japanese fleet is attacked by carrier-based aircraft west of the Marianas, 19 June 1944. Left: Japanese planes burn on the air strip on Tinian Island, the Japanese stronghold in the Marianas, following an attack by carrier-based planes.

